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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 001222

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: ARAB-KURD CONFLICT NARROWLY AVERTED MAY 8

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia Butenis; reasons 1.4 (b and d).

Summary

¶1. (C) On May 8, a potential armed confrontation between Nineva Governor Atheel Alnujaifi and Kurdish Peshmerga, 20 kilometers northeast of Mosul in disputed Hamdaniya province, was averted when the event the governor was scheduled to attend was cancelled. Peshmerga manning a checkpoint on the eastern fringe of Mosul city had orders -- reportedly from the highest levels of the KRG -- to "shoot to kill" if Alnujaifi's convoy attempted to enter areas of Nineva under the de facto control of (and claimed by) the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Embassy, Force, Corps, Division, and UNAMI efforts to persuade the Kurdish side that the governor had the right to travel within the province were unsuccessful. In the end, the Ministry of Youth and Sports cancelled the event to which Alnujaifi had been invited, allowing the governor to cancel his trip without loss of face. The decision to cancel may have been influenced by our numerous high-level engagements throughout the day. KRG President Barzani delivered a stinging response "rejecting" the Embassy demarche, calling it insulting and biased against the KRG (text of Barzani response in para ten; text of USG talking points in paras eleven and twelve).

¶2. (C) Summary continued: Swift action by 3-1 Cav, MNC-I KRG Team Chief, PRTs Mosul and Erbil, MND-N, MNC-I, MNF-I, the Embassy, and UNAMI helped avert an Arab-Kurd confrontation, but both sides may continue provocative statements and actions, and tensions remain high. We will be conferring internally and with UNAMI on the way forward. Our immediate goals are to get everyone to calm down and commit to a peaceful negotiated process of resolving disputes. We must refute the KRG view that physical possession of disputed territory means de jure control and that threatening violence against elected officials will buttress their territorial claims. We will tell Alnujaifi that while we recognize his right to travel to the DIBs region, in the interest of security and reconciliation, it should be coordinated through the Nineva Operations Command and with KRG liaison personnel.

The governor is a conflict-seeker on this issue, albeit one with better tactical political sense than KRG leaders. Alnujaifi likely perceives that his political interests lie in exploiting Arab-Kurd tensions. End summary.

A kite-flying festival almost leads to Arab-Kurd conflict

¶3. (S) The morning of May 8, MNC-I KRG Team Chief in Erbil was told that Alnujaifi intended to travel to Bashiqa later that day (to speak at an event that turned out to be a kite-flying festival) and warned MND-N that "there would be trouble." Kurdish liaison personnel on Mosul's FOB Marez gave MND-N Division Commander BG Robert Brown a parallel

message. The Kurdish deputy Commander of the Ninewa Operations Command (NOC) informed US liaison team that Bashiqa was part of "Kurdistan" and that members of the Al Hudba Gathering (Alnujaifi's party, which ran and won on an anti-Kurd platform in the January provincial elections) were not welcome in the area. (Bashiqa is a Yezidi town, surrounded by Orthodox Christian villages. Its district) Hamdaniya) is perhaps Nineva's most heterogeneous.) We also learned that NOC Commander Hassan, concerned about violence, declined to support the governor's trip with military security. That was later challenged by Deputy MOI Qmilitary security. That was later challenged by Deputy MOI Ayden, who instructed the local police chief to escort Alnujaifi.

¶4. (S) Elements of 3-1 Cav spoke to Peshmerga manning a checkpoint on the eastern fringe of Mosul city. They saw the Peshmerga deploying machine-guns and were told by the Peshmerga that they had orders to shoot to kill if the governor tried to pass the checkpoint, the first of five between Mosul and Bashiqa. CF personnel were told by Arab Iraqi Army units nearby that they had orders to fire on the Peshmerga if they started a confrontation. 3-1 Commander Volesky curtailed a visit to southern Nineva and flew directly to the checkpoint, where he tried to calm tensions.

Embassy, PRT, RRT, Coalition Forces and UNAMI work to avoid fighting

¶5. (C) After apprising the Embassy of these developments and jointly crafting a diplomatic strategy, PRT Nineva leader

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called Alnujaifi and said that while we supported his right to travel within Nineva south of the green line, events were unfolding so rapidly that we did not have time to convene the parties in order to facilitate his travel. We asked him to delay his visit; he thanked us for our policy position, but insisted that he had a right and an obligation "as citizen and governor" to visit the province. PRT leader then called the governor's ally Sheikh Abdullah Yawar and asked the sheikh to weigh in; Abdullah called us back and said that he had been unable to reach Alnujaifi but also that Alnujaifi would not be dissuaded.

¶6. (C) PRT Nineva leader called KDP Mosul Chairman Keshro Goran to ask that the order to shoot to kill be rescinded and that Alnujaifi be allowed to pass the checkpoint unhindered. Using talking points approved by the Embassy, PRT leader said that Alnujaifi was the democratically-elected governor of the province and had the right to attend an event hosted by the national government in the town. He added that a Kurdish checkpoint on the outskirts of a major Arab city threatening to kill the governor for driving less than five kilometers from his office was an act of insanity. Goran replied that he knew it was a crazy order, and appealed for us to raise the issue in Erbil; he also asked us to dissuade the governor from making the trip. Goran later drove to Bashiqa and called us to say that the citizens would block Alnujaifi "with their bodies" and the Peshmerga would open fire on Alnujaifi's convoy if he showed up.

¶7. (C) After a round of calls to senior Kurdish officials (KRG Minister of Interior Sinjari, Barzani's Chief of Staff Fuad Hussein, and others) by DCG LTG Brown, RRT Erbil, Embassy, Corps and Force failed to get the KRG to reverse its position, we called Alnujaifi back and again urged him to defer his travel. Charge d'Affaires called Alnujaifi's brother, Osama Alnujaifi, a member of the national parliament, and delivered the talking points for the Arabs. Osama Alnujaifi, like his brother, emphasized that the governor had the right to travel anywhere in the province and said the US should press the Kurds to observe the law and the constitution. The CDA assured Osama that the Embassy was

making those exact points, but called on Governor Alnujaifi to put off this unwise travel. The Governor's brother insisted that CF should provide protection for his brother against Kurdish aggression. Charge stressed that the US would not insert its forces into a conflict between the two parties. Osama agreed to call his brother and discuss the situation with him.

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A clash is averted
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18. (C) Meanwhile, UNAMI SRSG de Mistura spoke to DPM Essawi, who in turn also called Gov. Alnujaifi. In a final call to Gov. Alnujaifi, PRT Nineva leader informed him that, per previously announced policy, CF would make every effort to avoid a confrontation but would withdraw if shots were fired between Peshmerga and Iraqi Army or Iraqi Police units traveling with Alnujaifi. Alnujaifi said that he had informed the Prime Minister that "terrorists with illegal weapons" were threatening Iraq, and that he would continue. However, some 20 minutes later, we received word that the Bashiqa event to which Alnujaifi was heading had been cancelled by the Minister of Youth and Sport and that Alnujaifi was en route to his residence.

19. (C) Bashiqa itself is a Yezidi town surrounded by Q9. (C) Bashiqa itself is a Yezidi town surrounded by Orthodox Christian and Shebak villages. The district is demographically split; the pro-KRG Ishtar Christian party won 22.5 percent of the vote on January 31; Al Hudba came in second with 21.8 percent; the Kurdish list came fourth with 8.9 percent. What may have helped impress on both sides the seriousness of the potential confrontation was 3-1 Commander Volesky's decision to pull his forces from between the Pesh and the IA. He moved a few hundred yards away, prepared to flag down Alnujaifi's convoy to brief him on what was up ahead, and make a final effort to dissuade the governor from travelling. At some point before his convoy approached the checkpoint, Alnujaifi made the decision to divert.

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Kurds angry at U.S. over incident
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110. (C) Earlier, MND-N DCG LTG Brown had called KRG intel chief Masrour Barzani and had delivered points prepared by the Embassy for CDA Butenis, and LTG Brown's use (see para 11 below). Masrour called back an hour later, saying he was relaying the following oral message from his father:

-- We are extremely thankful to CF for their efforts to

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resolve this issue. We are very sorry that you have to be in the middle of all this.

-- We refuse this message from the US Embassy in the way it was written. It is an insult to Kurdish people and is biased against the KRG.

-- We hope the Ambassador is not aware of the message. We deeply regret that the US Embassy sent a message of that nature and that it holds Kurdish leadership responsible.

-- For the last six years we have not seen favor by the US Embassy.

-- We refuse to take any responsibility for today's events. We believe you should hold those who cause the delay of Article 140 responsible.

-- The US Embassy has not been helpful in trying to resolve Article 140. The US Embassy is partially responsible for delaying the Article 140 process.

-- Kurdish people have tolerated much and suffered a lot over the last six years in order to show the good will of the Kurdish Region. The KRG has not been pursuing its own constitutional rights because it did not want to make a problem for the USG in Iraq.

-- Clearly now enemies of CF and the New Iraq have come forward to cause problems. It is very sad that the US Embassy

is addressing us (the KRG) in an insulting tone and threatening Kurdish leaders for what happened in Mosul today.

-- We are no longer ready or willing to ignore our constitution rights.

-- We do not recognize the Green Line anymore.

-- Atheel Najafi was not elected by people in the disputed areas and they are not ready to be ruled by him.

-- The KRG believes they have more right to the disputed areas due to the blood they have shed there.

-- The KRG is not ready to accept someone stepping on the backs of the Kurds.

-- Written response will be sent to US Embassy if required.

¶11. (SBU) USG talking points used with KRG President Barzani and other Kurd interlocutors:

-- Nineva Gov Athiel Alnujaifi planned to travel to Bashiqa town today to give a speech. We have heard from Kurdish security officials and politicians that Gov. Alnujaifi will be stopped by the Peshmerga at a checkpoint just outside of Mosul. CF have been told by Peshmerga at the checkpoint that they have "shoot to kill" orders if Gov. Alnujaifi tries to force his way through the checkpoint. Gov. Alnujaifi told PRT leader Laskaris he will travel anyway.

-- The Kurdish position has no legal or constitutional basis. (Bashiqa, in Hamdaniya District, is south of the Green Line but in territory controlled by the Peshmerga.) Gov.

Alnujaifi has authority in areas of Nineva Province south of the Green Line and the right to travel to Bashiqa.

-- This is extremely dangerous and provocative. We ask that you immediately rescind orders to Kurdish security forces to prevent Gov. Alnujaifi from traveling.

-- We will work to resolve the core political disputes, but our immediate goal is to forestall violence. We have recommended Alnujaifi not travel, given the gravity of the situation and the potential for violence.

-- Provocative Kurdish statements and actions risk forfeiting the sympathy of the international community. Kurdish leaders will be held responsible if violence breaks out as a result of this.

¶12. (SBU) USG talking points used with Sunni Arab interlocutors:

-- Gov Athiel Alnujaifi planned to travel to Bashiqa town today to give a speech. (Bashiqa, in Hamdaniya District, is south of the Green Line but in territory controlled by the Peshmerga.)

-- We have heard from Kurdish security officials and politicians that Gov. Alnujaifi will be stopped by the Peshmerga at a checkpoint just outside of Mosul. CF have been told by Peshmerga at the checkpoint that they have "shoot to kill" orders if Gov. Alnujaifi tries to force his way through the checkpoint.

-- We have told Gov. Alnujaifi that we acknowledge his authority in areas of Nineva Province south of the Green Line and his right to travel to Bashiqa. We nevertheless strongly recommend he not travel, given the gravity of the situation and the potential for violence. Gov. Alnujaifi told PRT leader Laskaris he will travel anyway, saying "Let them shoot me."

-- We will work to resolve the core political disputes, but our immediate goal is to forestall violence. We ask that you make a clear request to Gov. Alnujaifi to not travel.

-- If Gov. Alnujaifi postpones his travel plans in response to these tensions, he will be seen as a responsible leader with a claim to the moral high ground. If he continues with plans to travel in the face of a significant danger of escalation and violence, he himself risks provoking violence and will forfeit sympathy from the international community.

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-- A speech in Bashiqa is not worth provoking a conflict.

Comment: One conflict averted, others surely waiting

¶13. (C) We can expect continued provocative statements and actions by conflict seekers on both sides. Alnujaifi's election on an anti-Kurd platform may be a reflection of his own attitudes, but he also continues to have political interests in exacerbating tension and will look for additional opportunities to do so. Indeed, he may have emerged from the events of May 8 feeling as though he won a crafty political victory. The Kurds, on the other hand, apparently are feeling cornered and friendless, which will not help Barzani respond in measured ways to Hadba provocations. Barzani's shoot to kill order was outrageous, as even Kurdish leaders in Ninewa acknowledge, but (to quote Talleyrand) it was "worse than a crime, it was a blunder," as preventing Alnujaifi's trip will have been a pyrrhic Kurdish victory if it provokes a consolidated Arab political or GOI military response. We managed to avoid a firefight May 8, due in large part to some excellent cooperation between our civilian and Coalition colleagues, but the Arab-Kurd issues that make such incidents likely in the future remain unresolved. We will soon recommend additional follow-on action. End comment.

BUTENIS